

New Radio Liberty to Carry Out Its Old Mission

By [Steve Korn](#)

October 15, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

For nearly 60 years, including the bleakest days of the Cold War to the exhilarating days of the Soviet collapse in 1991 and up through today, Radio Liberty has been a beacon of free expression and open dialogue for the people of Russia.

Like all things in life, however, time has transformed the political, legal and technological landscape. In a rapidly changing world, evolution and adaptation are the only path to longevity. This is as true for Radio Svoboda, which is Radio Liberty's Russian name, as it is for any other institution. Today, Radio Svoboda must adapt once again to new legal realities and to changing technology and distribution systems that provide the path to the service's continued vitality.

Change is difficult and often requires a leap of faith that things can be as good or better in the future as they are today. Due to circumstances, Radio Svoboda must change, and many of our loyal listeners are understandably upset by that. Not surprisingly, there has been a lot

of inaccurate information circulating in Russia and in the U.S. about the future of Radio Svoboda. This needs to be cleared up.

For more than a year, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has been looking at all of our 28 language services to understand and identify our target audiences. Our work in Russia indicates that our target audience of urban, educated people in their 20s to 40s want more from us.

For some time, we have been working on plans to revitalize Radio Svoboda. We are currently building a state-of-the-art video and digital facility in Moscow and believe that our future success in Russia will be on digital, Internet and social media producing the type of video, audio and text content that listeners and viewers demand. The new Radio Svoboda will become an interactive forum where our audience can engage in an ongoing dialogue with each other and with the service's journalists and guests. We also decided that our Russian service director should be a resident in Moscow, which is at the epicenter of the news that the service reports every day.

About a year ago, we learned that the country's mass media law would be amended to prohibit foreign control of broadcast licenses. This law, which goes into effect on Nov. 10, is similar to laws in the United States and in many Western nations. Once we learned about the impending change in the law, we consulted several law firms to explore whether we could continue to hold our broadcast license to own and operate an AM radio signal. We also explored a deal with a Russian businessman with existing media holdings aimed at keeping our AM programming on the air. Unfortunately, this fell through.

In August, we were advised by our Moscow counsel that there was no alternative to compliance with the new law.

But this is not a calamity. On the contrary, we see this as an opportunity to improve and strengthen Radio Svoboda and to accelerate our plans to move to digital platforms. We would, of course, like to be on every distribution platform possible, including AM radio. But at the same time, we recognize that AM radio reaches fewer people and is less effective than it was in the past. To reach our target market — the young, urban and educated Russians who are at the forefront of change and who will lead Russia in the future — we need to be on digital media, where our core audience lives, works and plays.

Sadly, the cessation of our AM signal and the switch to a digital service requires new ways of working with fewer people and people with different skills. We are grateful for the contributions made by those who have left us, but we owe it to the U.S. taxpayers who finance us to employ our funds in the most efficient way that we can.

Some of our critics incorrectly claim that Radio Svoboda is withdrawing or retrenching in Russia. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are not decreasing the amount of money we are spending on Radio Svoboda. On the contrary, with our new approach we will be able to spend more of our budget directly on programming and cutting-edge equipment and technology.

Anyone who thinks that we are retreating or shrinking in the face of a hostile Russian administration should look no further than to the hiring of our new director, Masha Gessen,

who holds both Russian and U.S. citizenship. She is widely recognized as a pre-eminent journalist, editor, author and leader.

A former Nieman Fellow in journalism at Harvard University, Gessen's latest book, "The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin," portrays Putin as a ruthless politician who dismantled Russia's democratic and free market reforms to become a totalitarian leader. She documents how Putin "seized control of media, sent political rivals and critics into exile or to the grave, and smashed the country's fragile electoral system, concentrating power in the hands of his cronies."

Anyone who is familiar with Gessen's work and political views understands that it is ridiculous to suggest that she is somehow caving in to the Kremlin's political pressure by heading Svoboda's new digital format. On the contrary, Gessen is precisely the person the service needs to survive and excel. She is brilliant and fearless and unafraid to speak the truth.

To those who are inclined to judge us fairly, I would ask you to withhold your final judgment until our transformation has been put in place and has had a chance to take root. We have just begun our new mission in Russia and are confident about our future.

Steve Korn is president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

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